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TO: MUS 2-Year Commission
FROM: Pad McCracken, Research Analyst
RE: Background Info on 1994-1995 MUS Restructure and the Vo-Techs
DATE: October 24, 2019

The purpose of this memo is two-fold:

1. Summarize the history of the governance of the vo-techs, and where possible provide reasons behind some of the changes in governance; and
2. Provide links to a number of valuable documents that provide a fuller history, especially legislative studies that resulted in changes to the governance of the vo-techs.

The history of Montana's "vo-techs" is lengthy and complicated. For one, they have been called a number of different names over the last 80 years: vocational training centers, vocational-technical centers, colleges of technology, and now just colleges or, sometimes 2-year colleges (not to be confused with Montana's three community colleges or the seven tribal colleges).¹ Beginning in 1940, high school districts in various communities were authorized to create vocational training centers to serve students 16 to 21 years of age. Since 1969, there have been five vo-techs in our more populous and higher property tax value counties:

1. Silver Bow—Butte; now Highlands College of Montana Tech
2. Cascade County—Great Falls; now Great Falls College MSU
3. Yellowstone—Billings; now City College at MSU Billings
4. Missoula—Missoula; now Missoula College UM
5. Lewis & Clark County—Helena; now Helena College UM

Over the years, questions of how these centers should be funded and governed have churned, as have larger questions about how best to provide vocational training all over the state. Because this commission was tasked with examining the effects of the restructuring, this memo will focus on

These excerpts get at two areas of long-simmering tension regarding vocational education:

Tension between academic education and vocational education. In the past, vocational education was too often seen as a second-tier track for those who could not succeed in more academic pursuits. The current view is that all students need to be college and career ready, that all students need to develop a well-rounded academic background and workplace and applied technical skills to be successful lifelong learners. This might be viewed as “mission drift” away from purely vocational programs, but it can also be viewed as mission expansion.

Tension between centralization and decentralization. A centralized system benefits from coordination and efficiency of operations (think transferability and shared administrative costs). Decentralization means more local control and perhaps ability to respond more quickly to local workforce needs. A perhaps unstated but related belief is that it is appropriate for governance to be more centralized at the state level when the state pays a greater share of the costs than locals. If Montana’s community colleges have more local control than other postsecondary units, it’s because of the local millage they contribute; they pay more of the “cost to be the boss.”

The 1978 subcommittee recommended that either:

1. The vo-techs be placed under the Board of Regents with the local school boards in the districts where centers were located acting in an advisory capacity; or
2. The vo-techs be made more like the community colleges with both governance and funding being shared between the state and locals.

The 1979 Legislature rejected both of those options, and instead gave oversight of the vo-techs to the Superintendent of Public Instruction.⁵

1985-1986 Study Leads to Transfer from Superintendent to Board of Regents

The previous solution didn’t have a lot of staying power, as the 1985 Legislature passed House Joint Resolution No. 52 “requesting a study of state governance and financing of Montana’s postsecondary vocational-technical centers.”

We recommend the state's units of higher education be managed and funded as a single unified enterprise.

We recommend the formation of a more fully integrated educational system, from kindergarten through graduate school, with opportunities for college courses while in high school and for continuing education and lifelong learning for all students who need and can benefit from them.

These excerpts hint at two other areas of tension:

Tension between efficiency and access. Duplication of programs and courses among the vo-techs and community colleges has been a long-standing concern, but in a state the size of Montana, there will need to be some duplication in order to provide access.¹⁰

Frustration with a lack of coordination between K-12 and higher education. Montana's constitutional framers created two distinct governing bodies for K-12 and higher ed, but gave them joint responsibility "for long-range planning, and for coordinating and evaluating policies and programs for the state's educational systems" as an overarching Board of Education. The Oxford Dictionary definition of the verb "to coordinate" is "to bring the different elements of (a complex activity or organization) into a relationship that will ensure efficiency or harmony." Montana's educational systems do coordinate in a number of ways, but the question of could they be better coordinated does resurface from time to time.

A month after the Crossroads report came out, the Postsecondary Education Study Committee submitted its recommendations¹¹ to the Legislative Finance Committee. The committee's recommendations addressed:

1. revising funding for the vo-tech centers;
2. moving to a lump sum appropriation to the Board of Regents to then allocate to campuses;
and
3. creating a permanent committee of legislators, regents, and representative of the governor to foster collaboration and accountability for higher education.

It appears no substantive changes to the University System as a whole or to the vocational-technical centers were made during the 1991 and 1993 sessions¹², apart from the creation of a Joint Committee of Postsecondary Education Policy and Budget (PEPB) reflecting recommendation No. 3 above. But the wheels of restructuring were spinning, and the vo-techs were a big part of that conversation.

¹⁰ For an analysis of this concern, see "Crossroads: Montana Higher Education in the Nineties" (pages 10-11)

¹¹ "Summary of Recommendations" by the Postsecondary Education Study Committee, Legislative Fiscal Analyst, October 1990.